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Jews and Christians

The Broader Aspects of Religion

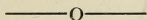
By Charles F. Dole

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JEWS AND CHRISTIANS

The Broader Aspects of Religion




A Sermon by

Charles F. Dole

Minister of the First Congregational Society

Jamaica Plain, Mass.



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Jews and Christians.

“ For into one spirit were all baptized into one body, whether Jews or Greeks, whether bond or free, and were all made to drink of one spirit.” (1 Cor. xii, 13.)

IT was an interesting occasion when, at the recent opening of the Semitic museum at Harvard university, Jews and Christians took part together in the exercises, and especially in recognizing the generous gift of a large-minded Hebrew merchant to an institution almost wholly managed by Christians. We are reminded at once of a number of remarkable utterances from prominent Jews in appreciation of the character of Jesus. These men are saying very heartily: Why should we not honor Jesus? He was surely a prophet of our religion. He represented its highest teachings.

The truth is that Judaism and Christianity were once one religion. The early Christians at first thought of themselves and were known to others as a Jewish sect. They claimed that

their faith was in direct line of development from Hebrew prophecies. They no more wished to go out of the mother church than John Wesley and his Methodist friends wished to leave the church of England. Indeed, if at almost any time since the beginning of Christianity Jesus himself, evidently a Jew, could be imagined as coming back to earth, the only place where he could have expected to find a welcome would have clearly been among his own people. In their synagogues he would have been at home, whereas in Christian churches he would have been a stranger, with very possible risk to his personal safety had he, according to his wont, opened his mouth to teach.

Judaism and Christianity may be likened to two rivers proceeding from the same group of fountains among the same hills, then turning in different directions, but presently following with various windings a somewhat parallel course, till at last they approach each other as they are about to empty into the sea. I wish to show that Christianity is developing into a large and beautiful form to which no thoughtful Jew can take exception.

The question is being asked from varying quarters, "What is Christianity?" This happens to be the title of a book by Prof. Harnack of Berlin. There are two kinds of answers to be given to this interesting question. One answer would attempt to show what Christianity has been in the course of its varied history. What have been the windings of its course? What different directions has it followed? What tributaries from other sources have added themselves to its movement? Into what great divisions and sects has its life passed? The other answer to our question concerns itself with the essence or spirit of Christianity. This is the endeavor in Prof. Harnack's remarkable book. This is really the only important and practical answer to our question. It matters little, as we sail up some great stream, to know precisely where the waters around us have come from, or what kinds of earths and impurities they bear along with them. It is enough that the river is constituted of one great element, water, buoyant to sustain our ships; it is enough to know how to distill the pure and wholesome water, freed from its impurities.

If I may be allowed to change my figure, we may suppose brought together various crude oils from the mineral wells of Pennsylvania or Texas or Russia. Our problem is to rid ourselves of the crudities in the rock oils which distinguish them from one another, and by our new processes of refining to procure from all of them a pure oil, suitable for universal use. In a somewhat similar way we are now enabled, for almost the first time in the history of religion, to refine away the crudities of different forms of faith and to procure a pure and universal religion.

Let us seek now to ascertain what the great simple elements are which doubtless constitute the essence or spirit of Christianity. The first of these elements is the idea of a humane or beneficent God, as contrasted with the harsh and cruel gods whom men have too often worshiped. The fact is, it was never a serious or practical problem whether or not God was three-fold in his nature—a question of pure metaphysics. The true question touched the moral character of God. Christianity has taught with increasing clearness, and never more clearly than to-

day, that the spirit or life of the universe is righteous and loving, that in some true sense he may be called the father of our spirits. This also was the characteristic teaching of the highest Judaism. As opposed to the Babylonian and Phoenician religions which degraded their worshippers, the Hebrew religion uplifted and ennobled its people. Today likewise good Christians and good Jews doubtless worship one and the same God, whose worship inspires men and makes them better.

A second element in pure Christianity is the idea of a divinity residing in man. It has often been said that the doctrine of the incarnation is the central fact of Christianity. Grant that this is true. What is this wonderful doctrine? It declares that the life of God has revealed itself in human form. It was something for a sensual world to believe that God had incarnated himself in a single man, Jesus, who might therefore be called the "son of God." How vastly more is it, when we have now come to believe that wherever truth, justice, humanity or love shine in human faces there is God, incarnate again and revealing his nature. There

is no Christian teaching more profound or stirring than this, but it is also good Hebrew teaching. Jesus himself is reported to have cited in defense of this very thought the words from an ancient psalm "I have called you gods." Moreover, this remarkable teaching of religion tallies with the highest and latest revelation of science. For we have come to see, that as a matter of fact in every aspect, man is a child of the universe. His body is constituted of the same elements which shine in the fixed stars. His intelligence, his consciousness, his sense of beauty, his justice, his goodwill all shine forth as so many sparks of the light and the life of the present spirit of the universe.

Again, Christianity has been preeminently a personal religion. There is a human need that religion should reveal itself by examples. Historic Christianity has taken the shining example of one man, its founder. See in this one man, the church has said, both what God is like and what man ought to be. And yet in strictness men have never been able to follow the example of Jesus. Every day this literal following of him as lord and master is obviously becoming

impossible. No modern man can live precisely the life that Jesus lived. He practiced the Jewish and Oriental customs and rites of his age. We do not profess to know what these customs and rites were. He seems to have held the thoughts of a child of his period. If we were able exactly to know what those thoughts were, they would probably be very strange and incongruous to us. No one can be perfectly sure what Jesus's answers would be to our moral problems, as for example, the wine question and our various social and industrial questions. The truth is that "the leadership of Jesus" stands, even for those who most frequently repeat these words, not so much for the single, historic life, as for a way of life. Here is a certain way or direction in which Jesus doubtless walked. But what a mighty procession have walked in the same way! Grand Hebrew prophets are in that way; Greek thinkers and poets, Socrates and Sophocles and Epictetus are there; statesmen and lovers of liberty, King Alfred and Lincoln, and our own modern poets and prophets mark the same way. It is the way, not of one person; it is full of noble personalities.

It was indeed a stirring note in the traditional Christian preaching, when as by the voice of one, Christ, the words came to the ears of youth: "Follow me." Is it any less noble challenge to the chivalry of youth, is it less rich in personal significance, when the whole grand chorus of the voices of the heroes and the prophets, the sages and the saints,—those of long ago, and those also whom we have known and loved,—bid us: Come over to our side and go with us.

In other words, while men need a personal ideal by which to guide their lives, all good men are coming to enjoy the vision of a somewhat similar ideal of this perfect life. Call it the "Christ-life" if you like, but if you call it so, be quite sure that it is more, and richer, and higher, than any single life that ever lived. A myriad persons have contributed to make it beautiful. Jesus's devotion, reverence, tenderness, sympathy, faith and love are in it. But Jesus never enjoyed the life of the home. I mean that he was not a husband or a father. He was the subject of an empire, and had never to perform the duties of free citizenship. He

loved nature, but how little ever came into his simple life of the joys of music and of art, or the thrilling conceptions of science! In our personal ideal of the perfect life, then, all the manifold functions and activities of humanity are blended together. There is something for the lover and husband and father, there is something for the artist, and for the lover of truth, and the good citizen. The whole is instinct with the spirit of good-will. There is also a personal ideal for the good woman. It was to meet this need that the ancient church shaped its doctrine of the spotless "mother of God." Today innumerable good women have contributed to make this ideal illustrious. In short, there is a personal ideal, growing to beauty, in the soul of every human being. It is the vision of all the highest possibilities which we are set to attain. Concerning the thought of this ideal life there is no possible issue between Jews and Christians.

Another element in the spirit of Christianity is the idea of sacrifice. The Christian was one who renounced everything for his religion. The "Christ" was one who gave up all things, glory

and honor, to die on the cross for love's sake. The thought was that there was something of sorrow, pity, sympathy, suffering with the pain of his children, in the heart of the infinite Father. No one has yet experienced religion, according to this conception, who is not willing, if need be to forsake all things, even life itself. We are coming now to see that this principle is universal in all true life. There is a deep law of cost and sacrifice. It has been expressed in the words that we must "die to live." Thus the scholar or lover of truth must be ready, if need comes, to give up all lower things and to risk his life for his truth. It is the same with the artist, or inventor or discoverer. He must be ready to take hazards, and like Columbus, sail on unknown seas, or like Palissy, offer up all his possessions for the sake of his art. It is the same with the lover, who does not yet love if he is not willing to venture all when love bids. It is the same with the honorable merchant. He stands ready to lose his fortune and become a poor man, that he may keep his honor unsullied. This has always been the law of the patriot. He must be ready to die that his coun-

try may live. His manhood consists in his good will to lose life, that is, the life of the body, that he may fulfill the life of the spirit. Now this marvelous law of sacrifice was in Judaism before ever Christianity blossomed out from the parent root. You find it in the story of Moses, praying to be annihilated if God would give him the life of his people. The same thought makes the music and the poetry of the second Isaiah. The thought is here coming to consciousness that the sufferings of the innocent are never in vain; they purchase something. The evil of the world is overcome by good. The lives of the brave and noble sufferers are always redemptive; death itself is the gateway to a nobler and larger life.

I mention one other great element in Christianity. It is the element of enthusiasm and infinite hope. There is in it the prediction of limitless human progress. There is always the vision before men of new and still ampler life. There is hope of forgiveness for the outcast and the wanderer. Here is the wonderful secret of the vitality of Christianity in the world. It has been a gospel to the lowest races. It has

made itself the religion of the most active and energetic nations. It has challenged men's energy and chivalry to help make its ideals real. Especially in its doctrine of forgiveness of sin, it has shown actual power to lift men out of their meanness and selfishness. Now this very element of enthusiasm and hope, this faith in infinite progress, even the idea of immortal life was at the heart of Judaism. This is not saying that all Jews entered into the heritage of this splendid enthusiasm. How few Christians have ever comprehended it! But the great Jewish leaders saw the splendid vision. Who has ever more graphically stated the law of forgiveness than the quaint Prophet Ezekiel? To every wrongdoer, says this early writer, lies open the way of return to the highway of righteousness. No rites, ceremonies, or sacrifices are required. Let any man cease to do evil and begin to do good, and he is at home again in his father's house. The parable of the Prodigal Son only puts this earlier teaching in more picturesque form. Or, again, where will you find the passages that have stirred the hearts of reformers more mightily than the great words in Isaiah,

or Hosea, or Amos? The outlook is ever toward a golden future. The time will surely come, they all say, when righteousness will rule the world. The hope is not for one race alone, but for all the neighboring peoples also, as in the prophecy of Jonah. The thought is here already coming to light of a God whose children are all men who dwell on the face of the earth. Judaism surely never needed more than to shake off its local superstitions, its tribal exclusiveness, and its burden of ceremonialism and priestliness, and to develop its central ethical and spiritual teachings in order to become a missionary religion. History shows that it was beginning to be such a religion at the time of Christ. This tendency was almost necessarily checked by the sudden expansion of the freer daughter religion.

Let us summarize now the great elements which we have seen to constitute the essential or spiritual Christianity. They are these: The humane, loving or fatherly God, the thought and worship of whom helps to make men divine; The idea of a divine humanity, of God incarnated in the life, not of one man alone,

but of all men who have once learned to love one another; a personal leadership, whether in the person of one beautiful, reverent and lovable life, or richer yet, in the way of a great procession of true-hearted, generous, devoted, loving and lovable persons, stretching from the earliest times down to the very world in which we are living today, and creating by a multi-form impression a beautiful composite ideal of a possible and practicable human life, both imperative and satisfying for every age and condition of mankind; next the law of cost or sacrifice, through which, as Paul said, we must all "die daily," or in other words, renounce and leave behind the lower things in order to turn them over into the higher values, must let go the round of the ladder where we now are, in order to lift ourselves to the next round of our ascent, and especially must alter the whole emphasis of our lives from the side of selfishness to the side of social service and beneficence; once more, we have the precious element of vital enthusiasm, of boundless hope, victorious over death, and constituting a gospel of good news for every one who will give his life

for the bringing in the kingdom of righteousness. I do not maintain for a moment that all Jews, or all Christians comprehend these great thoughts. I only claim that these thoughts are the very spirit of Christianity, and that they are all likewise at the heart of the best Judaism. The best Christians and the best Jews, the men who stand for the progressive faith under both names join hands in the assertion of these common principles.

But, some one may ask: Are there not certain rites and ceremonies, necessary to Christianity, which bar good Jews away? Here, for example, is the rite of baptism and the communion service. To this I answer, that at least one well known and thoroughly recognized body of Christians, the Quakers or Friends, make no use of any formal ceremonies whatever. No sect assuredly has manifested any more nobly the fruits of the spirit. Moreover, there is an increasing number of liberal churches who, like our own, so far as they use the time-honored customs of Christendom, use them with a sense and a wideness of interpretation which would debar no Jew from fellowship in them. Thus,

our simple service of baptism, free of every word of dogmatic phraseology, is only our glad recognition of a divine gift in the lives of our children, and of our duty and privilege in rearing them into the likeness of the divine image. And in the communion service, while we commemorate as lovingly as one may wish the life of the great friendly prophet of Galilee, we also commemorate all saints with him, and especially those nearest and dearest, whose influence on our own lives has happened to be most powerful and beneficent. Neither do we require any of our members, who do not find such services helpful, to join in them; while we hold ourselves quite free to alter their form at any time, or to omit them altogether, provided we can find more serviceable means for developing the spiritual life of our people.

But, some one may still urge, by way of objection: do you think that Jesus himself would call you his friends if you take his figure down from his accustomed pedestal of uniqueness and frankly make him one, however great, among an increasing line of masters and teachers? I cannot conceive, I answer, from any

point of view with which you approach the life of Jesus, that he should not welcome with affection and honor those of us who regard him in precisely the same natural way as his own friends in Capernaum and Bethany regarded him while he lived with them. I cannot conceive that he would not hold as his good friends all men everywhere who love goodness, and especially those who practice the Golden Rule which he was accustomed to teach. Would Jesus, in fact, be worthy of any high place of honor whatever, if he were capable of the narrowness and bigotry of some of those who call themselves by his name? Or, if he excluded honest and friendly men from his company because, if you please, they were unable to express their faith in God in the precise words of a creed?

Let me add here, for the sake of perfect clearness, that the faith which progressive Christians are developing, is not in any respect dogmatic or exclusive. So far as we use any forms of words to express our thought, such words, unlike the ancient creeds, are comprehensive and represent ideals too high and great for words. We do not venture to profess that we adequately

comprehend the great thoughts which we have characterized as making the essence of Christianity. They are above us. The ultimate facts always baffle our definitions. The great words merely serve to show the direction in which we seek to climb. Unable ourselves to exhaust their significance we make no complaint of those who for various reasons find themselves unable to express their own faith in any words of ours. It is enough if they and we move in the same direction, if we share a common spirit of friendliness and good will, if we may work together for great humane ends. It was never more true than now, that he who strives to do the will of God, shall learn at last to know the doctrine.

But, again says the voice of some objector, We fear that you are leaving nothing distinctive in your Christianity. Has Christianity ever lived then, I reply, by reason of the distinctions, the eccentricities and the impurities which have made its various sects peculiar? Was the spirit of Christianity ever comprised in those doctrines which honest men are obliged to forswear? Is there any slightest evidence that Jesus himself was the kind of teacher who laid stress on

the accidents and not on the realities? The fact is, and for the first time in history this fact is becoming intelligible, that the distinctive thing in the Christianity of which we have been speaking, is its purity from all peculiarities that once separated men into sects. The world waited for ages before it was able, by means of the new processes of refining it, to use the marvelous gift of its rock oil. So, with rare exceptions, the world has had to wait till it could learn to refine its Christianity from the crudities and superstitions by which men have mostly known it, and to use at last the pure oil in the lamps of its worship. There never was, and there is not now, anything so truly distinctive of Christianity as its spirit of love. Whoever has love has vital Christianity.

Shall we go on then, using the old names, Christian and Christianity, when once we have discharged them of all those superstitious or supernatural elements which men have commonly associated with them? Suppose that in the historical sense we have advanced beyond the line with which Christendom has generally limited the meaning of its names. Nevertheless,

we maintain that none have surer right to use the name of a thing than they who understand the difference between its substance and its shadow. Names, indeed, are constantly shifting their meaning. The word "Christian" has changed its meaning as often as the river has bent in its course. From the earliest times it has been more or less dimly recognized that he is a good Christian who has "the spirit of Christ." In all the noblest examples Christianity has been essentially an ethical religion and has stood for an ethical type of life. We take hold on this early and deeper meaning, we bring it to the front, we hold that it is the only meaning for which the growing world of thoughtful men can have any possible use. Not that we care very much about names, by the side of realities, but we find in these time-honored names very precious associations which lead our way. We find these names convenient and usable, once freed from all outgrown dogmatic issues, to express precisely what we mean. We do not insist that everybody must use them. We see how often they have been injured. What a task it will be to teach the millions of

China what Christianity is, in the face of the barbarous travesty which so-called Christian nations have perpetrated before that people! We cannot wonder that our Jewish neighbors may be long shy of the implications which generations of suffering have carried with them, regarding the Christian name. When all has been said, we still know of no better names than these same much abused and historic words, Christian and Christianity, as representing the mightiest thoughts, dear to good Jews and Christians alike, and illustrated in all ages by splendid examples. Find us better names for our common faith and we will use them forthwith.

Finally, there seems to be a certain point which men reach as they grow in the good life, where, as if ascending a mountain peak from different directions, they see the same point. The chasms and the crags which once separated them are now deep below. Seen from above, all these objects look small in the distance. The higher the climbers ascend, the closer they come together. They breathe the same air, they see the same view, they recognize

each other's faces, they go one way, they are brothers. So at a certain height of religious experience men of every faith recognize in each other the children of a heavenly Father, Whatever language they use, they understand each other, they hold the universal religion, and one love binds them together.



